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The economics of child welfare

[Washington]

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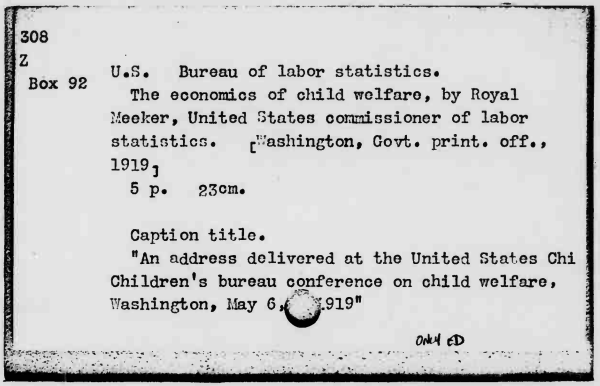

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The Economics of Child Welfare.[1]

By Royal Meeker, United States Commissioner of Labor Statistics.

I SUPPOSE, because I am an economist, I am expected to point out the relations between economics, the dismal science, and child welfare, and incidentally to take up the cudgels for the dismal science.

Whether we discuss babies, baseball, bolshevism, or the binomial theorem we eventually come up against the fundamental philosophy of life—the meaning of creation. What is it all about? The discussions that have preceded me have very largely dealt with babies as potential labor power. Now that is rather a shocking idea when first we come up against it treated in that crude, brutal way. Shall we nurture our babies, bring them to maturity, for the purpose of creating the most efficient labor force? Shall we follow the economic interpreters of history in ascribing all power to the economic motive in the determination of human conduct? Shall we follow the efficiency managers and the scientific experts in laying down the principle that the education of the child must be the education that will make him the most efficient producer, so that we may get more product, so that more babies may be brought into the world so that more work may be done to produce more goods so that more babies may be brought into the world and so on ad infinitum?

That is the way the opponents of the economic interpretation of history and the opponents of scientific management generally state the matter, and of course it immediately arouses every ounce of opposition in all our natures, and we say "away with such theories, away with such doctrines; we will have none of them. We will have the education that will bring the child to its fullest development."

Now, what is the fullest development of the child? You see we are already right up against the philosophy of the whole thing. What is it all about? What is our fundamental philosophy of life? Without either subscribing to or opposing the economic interpretation of history it is at once apparent that child welfare is largely economic. If we include in the definition of the economic motive every desire that the human heart feels, then there is no escape from the economic interpretation of history. If we want to give a narrow definition of it, however, and confine the economic motive to the chasing of dollars for the purpose of satisfying our more immediate physical

[1] An address delivered at the United States Children's Bureau conference on child welfare, Washington, May 6, 1919.

needs, if we hold that there are ethical motives and esthetic motives and instinctive motives that are more or less antithetical to the economic motive, even so we are bound to acknowledge that child welfare is very largely an economic problem, because ethical teachings, esthetic appeals, do not go very far on an empty stomach; they do not go very far with the children living under conditions of poverty and distress. We must at least have an economic background, even if we admit without further argument that economics do not include everything in the world and everything in the universe.

The science of economics has been called the dismal science by those who do not know anything about it. I will have to say that in defense of economics. I am not defending the early economic theorists, understand, but if economic science is dismal it is because of the exceedingly dismal character of the subject matter with which it deals—the subject matter being the human race.

Some men have been so bold and so foolish as to say that man is the only rational animal. I have never had evidence submitted to me sufficient to make me subscribe to that theory. For the most part and most of the time his actions are determined by the instincts of love, hate, fear, loyalty, and similar motives, which are the very reverse of rational. If man would only behave in a rational manner, Miss Lathrop and the Children's Bureau would be absolutely supernumeraries. We would not have any use for them, because children would be reared as they should be, so as to give them the fullest opportunity for development. Enlightened self-interest would take care of that. They would be reared in order to make them, if you please, the most efficient producers and attain the fullest possible development. There would not be any conflict between those two statements. It would be simply two different ways of stating the same thing. But man is anything but a rational animal. He is only momentarily and only fractionally rational. It is an axiom that adults are simply children of a larger growth.

Now, Miss Lathrop is engaged in the precarious task of trying to make her Children's Bureau and herself unnecessary. When she accomplishes the task that she is striving to accomplish, a children's bureau will not be necessary any more.

I take it that the Children's Bureau has been established for a purpose quite similar to that which brought about the establishment of the Bureau of Animal Husbandry. For many, many years we have taken a great deal of thought as to the upbringing of hogs, cattle, and horses. It is a very important thing. I am not saying a word against the Bureau of Animal Husbandry. It is a splendid thing. I am glad it was founded when it was, and I hope it will keep right on doing the excellent work it has been doing. I think hogs, cows, and horses should be given every encouragement to attain their fullest self-realization.

I do not mean to say that we utterly neglect our human babies, for that is not true, but we have not put enough gray matter into the consideration of what kind of upbringing children should be given in order to enable them to reach the fulfillment of the purposes of creation. Our Children's Bureau then is, in a way, a bureau of child husbandry, and it has for its purpose making itself useless. The Bureau of Labor Statistics is altogether different. I do not hold my job by any such uncertain tenure as Miss Lathrop, for we will have statistics with us always, even unto the end. I scarcely expect to continue my statistical efforts in Heaven, however, for statistics is just simply a means of aiding our vision so that we can see more clearly through the dark glass that surrounds us. You remember that St. Paul says, "Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face." When the dark glass is finally smashed, either by the statisticians or by the Almighty, it matters not which, statistics will no longer be necessary, for we will see face to face.

And while I am on the subject of statistics I wish to say, statistics are vitally important to the welfare of babies. Without the statistical investigations that the Children's Bureau has made under Miss Lathrop's very competent direction, we would not have a fraction of the knowledge that we now have of the needs for the proper upbringing of children. I may say incidentally that the statistical work of my own bureau has contributed somewhat to our knowledge of that subject.

We are here in a big hotel, and I think we consider it a very comfortable and a safe abode, but we do not think, not for a single moment, of the engineering formulas, the tests of materials, many of which were worked out hundreds of years ago, that were used in the construction of this building for our comfort and convenience. We just take the building for granted without prying into the mathematical engineering formulas upon which our safety depends. We are now engaged in working out the mathematical engineering formulas which will give us the means of determining the adequacy of incomes. This fundamental work on the cost of living is essential in order to try to get at not what standards should be but what standards of living actually are. I have not yet tackled the job of telling the working people of the United States what they ought to wear, what houses they ought to live in, and what amusements they ought to take, how many moving pictures they should attend per annum, how many dances they should attend per annum, and all that sort of thing. That lies far, far in the future.

However, when you get these fundamental engineering calculations once worked out in acceptable form then we can begin on that job. In fact, I have tried to get the domestic economists interested in trying to formulate standards of what ought to be, but I have

not succeeded very well as yet. I do not blame them for being shy of the problem. They are no more shy than I am. I do not like to assume dictatorial powers in the field of standardizing the family purchases. It is the most dangerous and the least inspiring work that lies before me.

The fundamental tables on the cost of living in some 20 cities that we have surveyed among those included in the country-wide survey of the cost of living, will appear in the MONTHLY LABOR REVIEW for May. Unfortunately it is not now in print, so it can not be distributed here. But I will send it to anyone interested in these figures. It does not contain any of these formulas, I promise you that. All that it will give you is the classified expenditures by the different groups of items for different income groups, from less than $900 to $2,500 and over. It will enable you to test out the accuracy of the statement made by Prof. Ogburn that the larger the family the larger the income. Quite obviously the explanation of that is the more children the more workers. The income increases with the number of income earners.

It is extremely interesting to study the changes in the percentage distribution of expenditures with changes in the size of the family. It shows the influence of the babies upon expenditures. A wife, when she first gets married, spends, according to the tabulations worked out, about as much for clothes as the husband, in the workingman's family. Some of you may be surprised that a woman spends almost as much as a man. The accepted notion is quite to the contrary. But just as soon as the first baby comes her expenditure for clothes drops. When the next baby comes then it drops again. So evidently the wife has become absolutely—I do not like to say it but I do not know of any other term in which to express it—a domestic slave. She is absolutely tied to the home—to the house I mean, not the home. She has not clothes in which she can attend a meeting like this to be taught about statistics and economics and all the other things connected with child welfare. She can not even go to church unless she is willing to go in an attire that does not lend itself to display.

That is a very interesting thing, and as a matter of fact, in many, many incomes which I have studied I have noted that with the increase of the family every item of expenditure except food declines not merely in percentage but in absolute amounts. This means, of course, that comforts and even necessities must be sacrificed to meet the most pressing need, the need for food. Of course, that is only in the lower income groups, but that certainly indicates that something needs to be done to bridge this gap. It certainly indicates that it is worth while thinking about this thing that is so carelessly and complacently called the American standard of living. I am

very curious to find out what under the sun this American standard of life is. I am willing to admit that the American standard of living is higher, is better than it is in other countries. I think we can show it is higher than in any other country of which we have statistics. Is it anything to boast of? I have not the nerve to boast about the American standard of living in the families to which I have referred. In fact, there is no American standard of living. There are as many American standards of living as there are different income groups and different sizes of family. That is, there are different amounts of expenditure varying with income and size of family for food, clothing, house room, house furnishings, health, insurance, and recreation. Recreation is just as much a necessity as is food and clothing. Some economic theorists who do not know anything about economic theory have held that amusement is a luxury, but it is as much a necessity as is food. The expenditure for care of health, including insurance of all kinds and amusements, in the family budgets that I have examined is wholly inadequate.

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